

A defeat, not a debacle: The religious right and the 1998 election

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On the morning after the November elections, pundits announced the death of the Religious Right as a political force. Fortunately, such obituaries are environment-friendly: they are recycled every few years. The movement's prognosis actually is better than advertised, although the campaign certainly disappointed Christian conservatives, who failed to elect some of their favorite candidates. These losses were especially painful because history had suggested that 1998 should be a good Republican year, and the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal was expected to energize conservatives and turn disgusted voters away from the Democrats. But though none of this happened, 1998 was just a defeat, not a debacle. The Religious Right remains a potent force in Republican politics.

Before assessing the movement's performance, we must highlight three critical facts. First, the election was dominated by incumbents: few officeholders in either party lost, and there were few open seats to contest. Second, incumbency allowed the Republicans to "win" both in seats and popular vote, but they fumbled a golden chance to tighten their grip on Congress. And third, like every party seeking majority status, the GOP had to assemble and hold together an unwieldy coalition, including Christian conservatives. Where Republicans managed this task well, they were quite successful.

To use a seismic metaphor, if the 1994 election was an "earthquake" that transformed the political landscape, then 1998 was an "aftershock," settling the disturbed landforms. In 1994 the Republicans took both houses of Congress for the first time since 1952 and achieved major gains down the ticket. In 1998 it was the Democrats who made history, as the first White House-led party since 1934 to gain House seats in an off-year election. Because Christian conservatism was an important force in producing the 1994 earthquake, it inevitably suffered losses as

political landscapes settled four years later.

The aftershock certainly exposed the limits of Religious Right influence. As always, explicitly "Religious Right" candidates fared worst. The most noticeable failures came in the South, where Governors Fob James of Alabama and David Beasley of South Carolina, both Religious Right poster children, were soundly beaten, while North Carolina Senator Lauch Faircloth fell in a closer race. Some other favorites also lost races across Dixie, most notably House candidate Gex Williams in Kentucky. Elsewhere, close friends of the Religious Right faltered at the scenes of past victories, losing gubernatorial races in Iowa and California. Movement-backed candidates failed by narrow margins in Senate bids in Nevada and Wisconsin, but Linda Smith was defeated more soundly in Washington. Only five GOP House incumbents were defeated, but three of these were Religious Right fixtures. Another half dozen highly touted challengers lost, most notably former congressman Bob Dornan in California. These defeats salted wounds from the GOP primaries, where several movement candidates fared badly.

Nevertheless, the 1998 aftershock did not crack the foundation of Religious Right influence. Most incumbent Religious Right stalwarts were reelected, including Helen Chenoweth in Idaho and Steve Largent in Oklahoma. Indeed, two-thirds of all House candidates supported by the movement prevailed, one-quarter of these in close races. More important, polls showed that Christian conservatives were a key part of the broad-based coalitions that put George W. and Jeb Bush in the governor's mansions of Texas and Florida (and reelected many other GOP governors). The Religious Right even has a few new friends in Congress. In the South, sympathizers prevailed in Kentucky's Sixth District, North Carolina's Eighth and South Carolina's Fourth, while in Illinois Peter Fitzgerald defeated Senator Carol Moseley-Braun. And the only Republican to defeat an incumbent House Democrat was heavily backed by Christian conservatives (Mark Green in Wisconsin's Eighth).

Three features of the 1998 aftershock help account for the misfortunes of the Religious Right:

- A broader electorate. Turnout was higher than expected, especially in close races and among key Democratic groups such as African-Americans and blue-collar workers. Indeed, black turnout neared historic highs for midterm elections in some states. The much-anticipated voter malaise did occur, but largely among moderates and, especially, conservatives. Even before election

day some Religious Right activists lamented that they were having difficulty motivating their constituencies. According to exit polls, self-identified white Christian conservatives made up at least 13 percent of the national electorate, but this figure was down from 17 percent in 1994. A more diverse electorate resulted in Republican losses in some close contests.

- A broader opposition. Both Republicans and the Religious Right faced stronger foes in 1998 than they did in 1994. The Democrats recruited better challengers, who often ran excellent campaigns against weakened Republican incumbents. A striking number of these candidates were social-issue moderates or even conservatives, like Ken Lucas in Kentucky's Fourth District. Many stressed their strong religious commitments, attracting some conservatives to their camp and undercutting the Religious Right. Not only were key Democratic groups such as labor unions, environmentalists and organized labor unusually energized in critical races, but there were new players as well: gambling interests, especially in South Carolina and Alabama, helped the Democrats with lavish get-out-the-vote drives. Finally, the Religious Right itself faced more determined opposition. Groups such as the Interfaith Alliance vigorously attacked its agenda. People for the American Way spent \$2 million on advertising in key media markets supporting the Democrats. And Americans United fought to keep evangelical churches out of the campaign. While these efforts surely did not match the Christian Coalition's 45 million voter guides or the \$3 million spent by Gary Bauer's Campaign for Working Families, they aroused opponents of the Religious Right and may have dampened the enthusiasm of some of its supporters.
- A broader agenda. The 1998 campaign was waged on a broader set of issues than that of 1994. While the national GOP ran a highly negative and largely ineffective campaign focused on the White House scandal, the Democrats stressed education, Social Security and HMO reform and were far more persuasive—even to some conservative Christians, who cast one-quarter or more of their votes for the Democrats. Such coalition-building around a broad agenda was crucial to the most successful campaigns in both parties, allowing the Republican Bush brothers to garner at least half the Hispanic vote in Texas and Florida, and Democrat Gray Davis to cut into the GOP's prolife constituency in California.

Old fault lines were exposed after the election as both Religious Right and Republican leaders voiced some legitimate grievances with each other's

performance. Christian conservatives complained about the GOP's strategic failure to produce a positive agenda, while Republican leaders faulted the right's relentless promotion of candidates who had little chance of winning, as well as its fixation on unpopular issues. The GOP's dilemma is that although Christian conservatives are the largest (and most loyal) Republican constituency and the party must have their support to succeed, they are just one of the critical voting blocs the GOP needs to win.

In some cases, GOP candidates' close association with the movement was a liability, as shown by Senate candidates Linda Smith in Washington state and Gary Hofmeister in Indiana's Tenth District. (Such problems would have intensified if Christian conservatives had succeeded in nominating candidates like Randall Terry, founder of Operation Rescue, who unsuccessfully challenged a Republican incumbent in New York.) But the reverse is also true. Some GOP nominees, like Nancy Hollister in Ohio's Sixth and Delbert Hosemann in Mississippi's Fourth, were probably too moderate for their districts. The same conclusions apply to the Religious Right's agenda: an exclusive emphasis on social issues can hurt Republicans even in the Republican South, while careful social-issue appeals can be part of a winning platform for the GOP even in the Democratic Northeast.

The election results exacerbated longstanding divisions among Christian conservatives. Pragmatists argue that they must accommodate the party because Republican victories are required for any real progress on the profamily agenda, but purists think that accommodation means that the GOP takes their votes and ignores their views. Whatever this argument says about the differing temperaments of movement leaders, it raises vital issues of organizational effectiveness. Many Christian conservatives demand quick action on their agendas as the price of their participation in the party. Too much pragmatism undermines Religious Right activism as surely as too much purity undercuts the GOP's ballot box appeal. The 1998 aftershock bolsters the strength of the pragmatists, but the memory of 1994 still stirs the purists.

For these reasons, the Religious Right in all its fractious diversity will be a strong force in 2000, when both the White House and Congress will be up for grabs. Will the movement's energy help preserve the political contours produced by the Republican earthquake of 1994? Or will infighting contribute to another aftershock? The 1998 elections make clear that either scenario is possible.